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# THE MUSICAL TIMES, And Singing Class Circular.

DECEMBER 1st, 1849.

## CURIOSITIES OF MUSICAL HISTORY.

No. I.

*Contributed by E. HOLMES, Author of the "Life of Mozart."*

THE English have now been so long accustomed to view themselves as a nation not as producers, but merely as judges and patrons of music, that we are apt to forget whether we have ever had any high position or influence on the progress of the art. It is proposed to devote some consecutive papers to the consideration of this interesting national question.

The energy of individual powers combined with favorable circumstances, has distributed the sway in music successively through the polished nations of Europe. From the era of the discovery of double counterpoint by the Flemish monk Ockenheim, Flanders and France, Italy and Germany, have been by turns paramount. In compendiously revolving the history of music, the epochs on which the mind reposes are comprised principally in the age of counterpoint commencing with Ockenheim and Josquin—in the origin of the ecclesiastical style of Italy, with Palestrina and the establishment of the lyrical drama—in the school of declamation and poetical expression, commenced in England by the Composers at the Restoration,—and, finally, by the invention and development of chromatic harmony begun in the eighteenth century by Sebastian Bach, and ending in the perfection of the instrumental art, and the pre-eminence of the German school, through the labours of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. Yet in the briefest, and comparatively the most modern summary of the deserts of musicians, many silent contributors to progress must remain unnoticed; and even of the greatest masters it is difficult to determine their exact relative amount and quota of service.

As for the remote history of music, it is so involved in conjecture, and embarrassed with clashing and contradictory testimony, that nothing is to be made of it, unless on the supposition that the language of ancient writers is not to be received in the modern acceptation:—that arts have flourished and been lost, or that during many ages a high degree of excellence in music has been traditional; an accomplishment which bore no fruits in composition, and died with its possessor, as we know it to have been with the minstrels, and even with some great extemporary performers of our own time. Some such hypothesis is indeed necessary to reconcile the passages out of the old writers, poets, fathers, &c.,

and the silent testimony of painting and sculpture, with the actual remains of the music of antiquity.

We have not wrought ourselves to the conclusion that the Greeks sought a powerful tone beyond all things in music, on account of the inflated cheeks of some of the pipers which still subsist in antique sculpture. This method of blowing is so inconsistent with the modern theory and practice of wind instruments, that we must needs allow some licence to the grotesque fancy of the artist; and Keats may still be right when, in his "Ode to a Grecian Urn," he exclaims—

"Therefore, ye *soft* pipes, play on,  
Not to the sensual ear, but more endeared,  
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tune."

The first stumbling-block in musical history is found in the endeavour to reconcile the seven Greek writers on music, who treat of the chromatic and enharmonic, with the opinion of the learned that the Greeks were unacquainted with harmony. The unison of a chorus is certainly its most condensed and penetrating effect, though on repetition it loses its power on the hearer; and Aristotle, who considered "music essential to tragedy," may have found even in single sounds subjected to the natural rhythm of verse a true medium of expressing the grand and varied sentiments of the tragic poets. But if in this age little of the power and destination of choral music was known, the art became of importance through its connection with a species of dramatic poetry, which is perhaps the most durable monument of human genius.

Descending from these remote times to the first ages of Christianity, we find St. Augustine expressing his delight at the performance of the Ambrosian chant in the church at Milan, with an enthusiasm which would befit a modern amateur of the cathedral service at one of its choicest celebrations. "The voices flowed in at my ears, truth was distilled in my heart, and the affection of piety overflowed in sweet tears of joy." What can the finest church music do more? And yet nothing is more difficult than to realize the saint's description, allowing the absence of harmony and rhythm, and by force only of that bald and rude form of melody of which the unisonous chant is composed. Music, however, of this kind in the churches is said to have allured the Gentiles, and to have caused many who "came to scoff," to be baptized before their departure.

It must be confessed that the early Christians diversified their monotonous musical service with ingenuity enough. They had antiphonal singing, processional singing, singing combined with instruments, and on certain occasions with dancing; ceremonies and performances well calculated to attract the multitude; and, combined with the enthusiasm consequent on the establishment of a

new religion, sufficient to justify the fathers of the church in their warm descriptions of the effects of music. Yet it is impossible to conjecture what their performances really were; and the remains of church music which are still preserved in various libraries in ancient missals, rituals, psalters, &c., instead of throwing light upon the subject, only serve to increase its perplexity and obscurity.

The slow progress of the art during many successive ages, in which poetry and painting had obtained great distinction, seems to favour the opinion that there has existed at all times a natural and traditional music, independent of the science, which often made the fortune of the possessor, which he was in no hurry to communicate or to diffuse, if he could, in books. The first man who danced a measure or whistled a tune in the joy of his heart had probably some notions of rhythm, though notes and bars had not yet been imagined.

According to William of Malmesbury, who wrote in 1120, the Saxons had organs in their churches before the Conquest. His description of one given by Dunstan to his own abbey in the reign of King Edgar is said to present a considerable resemblance to that in present use. The early history of this noble instrument of harmony, (which, however, but slowly influenced the progress of vocal music,) awakens lively curiosity. The organist of these days is described as "a robust mortal, running *with swift fingers* over the concordant keys, and making them, as they smoothly dance, emit melodious sounds." That he was "a tall sturdy fellow, with force necessary to beat down the clumsy *carillon* keys of this instrument of rude invention," may be readily imagined; but the character and style of his execution is so inconsistent with the genius of the organ as at present understood and felt, that we can only venture to conceive a monastic voluntary of those days to have been something like what we now hear on the bagpipe. A descriptive epithet in Chaucer's tale of the "Cock and the Fox," confirms what has been said of the rapid and *brilliant* style of organ performance which prevailed in the ecclesiastical performances of the period. The voice of *chaunticlere*, he tells us, is

"merrier than the merry organ,  
On massè days that in the churches gon."

The organ was only by slow degrees used to accompany singing. Its first destination seems to have been exclusively instrumental, and for the purposes of the voluntary. So to this day we may observe in the chief cathedrals of the continent a great organ destined to the performance of pieces on gala and saints' days; while a smaller instrument is employed to accompany the choir. Although an early writer compares the

rude efforts of the French and Germans in singing the Gregorian chant to the "sound of a cart jolting down a pair of stairs," it seems questionable whether the earliest organs were of a tone and construction fine enough to accompany even such voices as these. We know not whether most to admire at the early invention of the organ, or that the mysteries of its construction in compound stops, evolving from the most hideous discord the most delightful harmony, remains to this day an unsolved problem in the phenomena of sound.

However, the organ had at length its effect on the choral service. The first rude harmony of fourths, the *faux Bourdon*, in which the Catholic service is sometimes chanted abroad to this day, is thought to have been suggested by the composition of the sesquialtra stop on the organ. There is still more authenticity in a passage quoted by Ducange from the burial register of the Church of Paris, in which appears an order that the clerks who shall organize "Allelujah" on the new festival of St. Thomas of Canterbury, (our Archbishop à Becket,) shall receive six *deniers*. The process of organizing appears, from the chant quoted by Burney, to consist of making a couple of thirds just before the period of a chant sung at first in unison. Burney thinks the pay for this service magnificent.

It is interesting to observe that the effect of this sudden outbreak of harmony, at a close, after the monotony of voices singing in unison, subsists at the present day in the responses of the cathedral service, and delights our ears as much as it did those of our ancestors. The daily service established in cathedral and collegiate churches is plainly a modification of the discipline of the monks in the early ages of Christianity, which engaged them to preserve a perpetual psalmody, *Laus perennis*, in emulation of the vestal fire and perpetual lamps of antiquity. And, certainly, when the majestic edifices in which the pompous Catholic service was first celebrated, had arisen over Europe, a more appropriate or durable music could not be conceived for them than the unisonous Gregorian chant. That this passionless and solemn monotony harmonizes with the genius, and expresses the language of the place, is evident to the most simple and unsophisticated hearer. While the choir was well filled with monks from the neighbouring abbey, there must have always been grandeur of effect; and in the single tones of the rough, unmeasured music, qualities calculated to wear well, and not pall upon the ear. It is since more of the artifices of refinement, more harmony and melody have crept into the music of the cathedral, that choirs have thinned, and the daily services have acquired a character of routine. The truth is, that the more music becomes elevating, beautiful, and exciting, the more it requires due intervals of re-

pose; and the most enthusiastic admirer of the melodies of Mozart and Beethoven would certainly tire of them if set to sing them several hours a day.

But among the arts of church music which have been lost, none seems more interesting than that of extempore descant, namely, the improvisation of fugues by singers on a given chant. Padre Martini relates that he heard this kind of harmony, in four parts, in great perfection at the Church of St. John Lateran, in Rome, 1747. As this is a proof that the singers were profoundly versed in harmony, as well as skilled in the management of their voices, it bears the highest testimony to the training pursued in the conservatories of Italy at the beginning of the eighteenth century. This same art was called in France *Chant sur le livre*. "There are musicians," says Rousseau, "so well versed in this kind of singing that they lead off, and even carry on fugues extempore, when the subject will allow it, without confounding or encroaching upon the other parts, or committing the least fault in the harmony." Singers of this kind may have been produced in the great Neapolitan school of counterpoint, over which Leo, Durante, &c., presided; but they and their art have been so long removed from observation, that such unpremeditated harmonic exploits now read like a fable.

In forming opinions upon the music of distant and unknown ages, the only guide to just reasoning is the analogy of experience. Invention is not always continued from the point which it has attained with a composer of genius; but taste fluctuates, and at different periods the art appears to relapse and retrograde. It was thus in England after the time of Purcell, whose graceful melody and elegant harmonies often recall, not Handel, his successor, but the manner of Mozart. That in the commencement of the attempt to arrange harmonious sounds every step in the abstract metaphysical science of music was an effort of mind scarcely less remarkable than the first advances in astronomy, may be conceived. The monks, who were the earliest labourers in this field, must have been embarrassed by the wild untutored graces of the musical laity. Chained to their *canto fermo*, they could no more have expressed the sounds of the minstrel in the hall than of the birds in the woods. Before the invention of printing, while music was still much encouraged in monasteries, discoveries may easily have been made and lost; as the same ideas have often occurred to different composers; and nothing appears more uncertain than the award of history to the pioneers of musical composition, Hucbald, Guido, John de Muris, Franco, &c. Of Hucbald Burney observes, "his idea that one voice might wander at pleasure through the scale while the other remains fixed, shows him to have been a

man of genius and enlarged views, who, disregarding rules, could penetrate beyond the miserable practice of his time into our *points d'orgue*, *pedale*, and multifarious harmony upon a holding note or pedal bass, and suggest the principle, at least, of the boldest modern harmony." This was the great discovery of the year 920; when the good father, certainly with no very "enlarged views," carried the *canto fermo* into poetry, addressing Charles the Bald in three hundred verses in praise of baldness, each verse beginning with C; and undoing with barbarous pedantry, the reputation which his ideas on music had justly acquired.

The practice of writing upon a *canto fermo* has been the basis of contrapuntal skill in all times. In the middle ages, this custom contributed to give a closeness to the ideas, and to form that unity of style, which are the prominent characteristics of the best church music at the present day. Notwithstanding the many abuses of counterpoint in the periods preceding and following Palestrina, the ecclesiastical style still remains firm in its distinctive features. Even the formal and unpleasing ground-bass introduced into instrumental music, and on which our forefathers were wont, on a couple of viols, by turns to exercise their invention in making extempore variations, was not unuseful as a discipline of the invention, and an exercise of the hand.

To arrive at our present art of notation, in which there is no succession of sounds or singularity of accent which cannot be expressed, the labours of long centuries now condemned to oblivion have assisted. Let us not be unjust to those who have performed the ungrateful labour. Men are under the dominion of their age, and must work with the materials which surround them; and possibly some productions which now only call up a smile of contempt, estimated by their real originality would deserve better treatment. This is particularly the case with instrumental music, of which the origin and the completion are comparatively not far distant. From the time when the movements of instrumental music wanted a name, to the posthumous quartetts of Beethoven, there is no great interval; yet all who were first renowned in that branch of the art are now mentioned with little honour. Dr. Bull, whose lessons appear so queer and stiff in Queen Elizabeth's Virginal Book, is one of the earliest musicians who aspired to unite the character of composer and instrumental virtuoso. To have discovered passages of which there are no models, to have invented the mechanism of their execution, and then played them himself, exhibits an artistic accomplishment more surprising and worthy of high appreciation, than many a brilliant feat of modern times, which has been led up to, and to which the route has been indicated by de-

grees. Bull afterwards settled in Germany, and died at Lubeck, whence, curiously enough, sprung the greatest organist of the seventeenth century in Germany, Buxtehude, the model of John Sebastian Bach; a fact which renders it probable that the presence and example of the Englishman had not been without its influence.

The progress of music in England during the monastic ages, bears a favourable comparison with the rest of Europe. Bede tells us "that when Austin and the companions of his mission had their first audience of King Ethelbert, in the Isle of Thanet, they approached him in procession singing Litanies." But this was no new thing. St. Germanus had been heard to sing *Hallelujah* many years before the arrival of St. Austin. In 680, the Precentor of St. Peter's was sent over by Pope Agatho to instruct the monks of Weremouth in singing, and his reputation drew the masters of music from all the monasteries of the north to hear him. The earliest piece of secular counterpoint for voices is the Canon, in six parts, on the approach of Summer, of which the MS. is preserved in the British Museum. In 1430, minstrelsy appears to have taken precedence of chanting. Hearne relates, that at the annual festival of the Holy Cross at Abingdon, "twelve priests received only fourpence each for singing a dirge; and the same number of minstrels were each rewarded with two shillings and fourpence, besides diet and horse meat." But we may take a more picturesque illustration of the fact.

"In the year 1441, eight priests were hired from Coventry to assist in celebrating a yearly obit in the church of the neighbouring Priory of Maxtoke, as were six minstrels belonging to Lord Clinton, who lived in the adjoining castle of Maxtoke, to sing, harp, and play in the hall of the Monastery during the extraordinary refectory allowed to the monks on that anniversary. Two shillings were given to the priests, and four to the minstrels, and the latter supped with the sub-prior in the painted chamber, which was lighted with eight massy tapers of wax." At this early period traditional and individual skill had taken precedence of the science taught in the schools. The employment of minstrels at a funeral anniversary is suggestive. Many of these professors of the joyous science seem to have been classed among "the sturdy rogues and vagabonds" of the day; but the wildness and licence of the time must plead in mitigation of the judgment passed on our respectable musical ancestors.

*To be continued.*

#### ENGLISH OPERA.

A correspondent who writes to us on the subject of English Opera, *apropos* of the undertaking which is understood to be under consideration, and who wishes to have the law laid down touching the expediency of

all recitative being sung, to the exclusion of spoken dialogue—has opened a question which cannot be closed in a paragraph. He may be reminded that Italy is the only country where opera is exclusively carried on in music—whereas in Germany, France, England, where the languages are less mellifluous and the forms of conversation are less periphrastic, it has always been found difficult to arrange familiar parlance in a form which shall not sound ridiculous when sung:—and hence the comic operas of the three countries have mostly, if not always, been conducted in spoken dialogue. While our friend cites the custom of the *Académie Royale* of Paris, which includes Auber's lively 'Philtre,' he forgets that some of the finest French serious operas—as Grétry's 'Richard,' and Cherubini's 'Les Deux Journées' and 'Medée'—were produced with spoken text: also, that such is the usage throughout Germany with the operas of Mozart. —We are glad, however, to see that the question of the text for Music is beginning again to engage attention:—since we are satisfied that in proportion as it is neglected the chances of our having good and original opera-composers decrease. When we recollect that Dryden wrote for Purcell, that Milton, Gay, and Congreve, furnished the words to Handel, and that Addison disdained not to try his hand on an opera book,—when we recall the merry and pointed comic rhymes produced by Harry Carey for Lampe to set in his burlesque "Dragon of Wantley,"—when we indicate that Milton and Metastasio were treated by Arne,—or, to take a more modern instance, when we remind those who treat us as cavillers of the anxious and intelligent pains taken by Sheridan that his "Duenna" should be sensible not *nonsensible* as a drama (purposely limiting our illustrations to English examples) we cannot feel that our desires are Utopian or their execution without precedent in the story of our own stage.—*Athenæum*.

#### MUSIC, A MEANS OF POPULAR AMUSEMENT AND EDUCATION.

*(Abridged from Sharpe's London Magazine.)*

THE question we have to answer is this—*Can we contrive to make popular amusement a means of education and refinement?* Can such new, genuine, cheap amusements for the working classes be provided as shall have this desirable influence? The answer we supply by telling what has been done in one instance.

There is a market town on the borders of Norfolk and Suffolk, which once had mickle fame, for that a proud baron who had his castle there, from it hurled his defiance against "the king of Cokenaye;" and which of late years has had a better claim to renown as the source of some of the best and most accessible editions of the great classics of England. During this past summer there was assembled here, one evening, in a spacious and elegant room, once the theatre, and now, on market-days, the corn hall, a mixed but most cheerful company. It was the periodical festivity of a singing class, which has for some years been successfully carried on by a gentleman of the town. Beside the class, which numbers eighty members, there were nearly 200 visitors present, most of them working-people, servants, apprentices, &c.; but with a considerable proportion from the classes above them, tradespeople from the town, farmers and landowners from the surrounding country, clergymen, dissenting ministers, and their families.

Seated in groups, arranged with methodical irregularity, so that none should be below "the salt," in their best dresses, and in their best behaviour too, every one feeling